

THE GREAT AUK ¹

By IRVIN S. COBB

From The Saturday Evening Post

AS regards the body of the house it lay mostly in shadows — the man-made, daytime shadows which somehow always seem denser and blacker than those that come in the night. The little jogs in the wall behind the boxes were just the same as coalholes. The pitched front of the balcony suggested a deformed upper jaw, biting down on darkness. Its stucco facings, shining dimly, like a row of teeth, added to the illusion. At the bottom of the pit, or the family circle, or whatever it was they called it at the Cosmos Theater, where the light was somewhat better, the backs of the seats showed bumpily beneath the white cloths that covered them, like lines of graves in a pauper burying ground after a snowstorm.

A third of the way back, in this potter's field of dead-and-gone laughter, a man was hunched in a despondent posture. His attitude would make you think of a lone ghost that had answered the resurrection trump too soon and now was overcome with embarrassment at having been deceived by a false alarm. The brim of his hat rested on the bridge of his nose. Belonging, as he did, to a race that is esteemed to be essentially commercial, he had the artistic face and the imaginative eyes which, as often as not, are found in those of his breed.

His name was Sam Verba. He was general director

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for Cohalan & Hymen, producing managers. He was watching a rehearsal of a new play, though he did not appear to be. Seemingly, if he was interested in anything at all it was in the movements of two elderly chorewomen, who dawdled about the place deliberately, with dust rags and brooms. Occasionally, as one of the women raised her voice shrilly to address her distant sister, he went "Sh-h! Sh-h!"—like a defective steam pipe. Following this the offender would lower her voice for a space measurable by seconds.

Border lights, burning within the proscenium arch, made the stage brightly visible, revealing it as a thing homely and nude. Stage properties were piled indiscriminately at either side. Against the bare brick wall at the back, segments of scenes were stacked any-which-way, so that a strip of a drawing-room set was superimposed on a strip of a kitchen and that in turn overlapped part of a wainscoted library, the result being as though an earthquake had come along and shaken one room of somebody's house into another room and that into another, and then had left them so. In sight were four women and nine men, who perched on chairs or tables or roosted, crow-fashion, upon the iron steps of a narrow staircase which ascended to the top tier of dressing rooms, extending along a narrow balcony above. The hour was eleven o'clock in the morning. Therefore these persons wore the injured look which people of their nocturnal profession customarily wear upon being summoned out of their beds before midday.

At a little table, teetering on rickety legs almost in the trough of the footlights, sat a man hostilely considering a typewritten script, which was so interlined, so marked and disfigured with crosses, stars, and erasures that only one person—the author of these ciphers—might read his own code and sometimes even he could n't. The man at the table was the director, especially engaged to put on this particular piece, which was a comedy drama. He raised his head.

"All right, children," he said, "take the second act — from the beginning. Miss Cherry, Mrs. Morehead — come along. Stand by, everybody else, and, please, in Heaven's name, remember your cues — for once."

A young woman and a middle-aged woman detached themselves from one of the waiting groups and came downstage. The young woman moved eagerly to obey; she was an exceedingly pretty young woman. The other woman, having passed her youth, strove now to re-create it in her costume. She wore a floppy hat and a rather skimpy frock, which buttoned down her back, school-girl fashion, and ended several inches above her ankles. Under the light her dyed hair shone with the brilliancy of a new copper saucepan. There were fine, puckery lines at her eyes. Her skin, though, had the smooth texture which comes, some say, from the grease paint, and others say from plenty of sleep.

She held in one hand a flimsy, blue-backed sheaf; it was her part in this play. Having that wisdom in her calling which comes of long experience, she would read from it until automatically she had acquired it without prolonged mental effort; would let her trained and docile memory sop up the speeches by processes of absorption. Miss Cherry carried no manuscript; she did n't need it. She had been sitting up nights, studying her lines. For she, the poor thing, was newly escaped from a dramatic school. Mrs. Morehead wanted to make a living. Miss Cherry wanted to make a hit.

These two began the opening scene of the act and, between them, carried it forward. Miss Cherry as the daughter, was playing it in rehearsal, exactly as she expected to play it before an audience, putting in gestures, inflections, short catches of the breath, emotional gasps — all the illusions, all the business of the part. On the other hand, Mrs. Morehead appeared to have but one ambition in her present employment and that was to get it over with as speedily as possible. After this

contrasted fashion, then, they progressed to a certain dramatic juncture:

"But, mother," said Miss Cherry, her arms extended in a carefully-thought-out attitude of girlish bewilderment, "what am I to do?"

Mrs. Morehead glanced down, refreshing her memory by a glance into the blue booklet.

"My child," she said, "leave it to destiny."

She said this in the tone of a person of rather indifferent appetite, ordering toast and tea for breakfast.

A pause ensued here.

"My child," repeated Mrs. Morehead, glancing over her shoulder impatiently, but speaking still in the same voice, "leave it to destiny."

"Well, well—" snapped the man at the little table, "that's the cue, 'leave it to destiny.' Come on, McVey? Come a-w-n, McVey? Where's McVey?" He raised his voice fretfully.

A nervous, thin man hurried down the stage.

"Oh, there you are. Go ahead, McVey. You're keeping everybody waiting. Did n't I tell you you'd have to read the grandfather's part to-day?"

"No, sir, you did n't," said McVey, aggrieved.

"Well, anyhow, I meant to," said his superior.

"But I'm reading Miss Gifford's part this morning," said McVey, who was the assistant stage manager. "She had to go to see about her costumes."

"You'll have to read 'em both, then," ordered the special director. "Anyhow, the parts don't conflict—they're not on the stage together during this act. Do the best you can. Now let's go back and take those last two sides over again."

Vibrantly and with the proper gesture in the proper place, Miss Cherry repeated her speech. Wearily and without gestures, Mrs. Morehead repeated hers. The flustered McVey, holding the absentee Miss Gifford's part in one hand and the mythical grandfather's in the other,

circled upstage and, coming hurriedly down, stepped in between them.

"No, no, no," barked the director, "don't come on that way — you'll throw both these ladies out. Come on at the upper side of that blue chair, Mac; that's the door. This is supposed to be a house. You can't walk right through the side of a house without upsetting things. You realize that, don't you? Once more — back again to 'leave it to destiny.'"

The rehearsal went on by the customary process of advancing a foot and a half, then retreating a foot, then re-advancing two feet. The novices in the cast were prodigal of their energy, but the veterans saved themselves against what they knew was coming later, when they would need all they had of strength and more, besides.

A young man let himself in through the box-office door and stood in that drafty, inky-black space which theatrical folks call the front of the house and the public call the back of the house. Coming out of the sunlight into this cave of the winds, he was blinded at first. He blinked until he peered out the shape of Verba, slumped down midway of a sheeted stretch of orchestra chairs, and he felt his way down the center aisle and slipped into a place alongside the silent, broody figure. The newcomer was the author of the play, named Offutt; his age was less than thirty; and his manner was cheerful, as befitting an author who is less than thirty and has placed a play with an established firm.

"Well," he said, "how's everything going?"

"Rotten, thank you!" said Verba, continuing to stare straight ahead. "We're still shy one grandfather, if that should be of any interest to you."

"But you had Grainger engaged — I thought that was all settled last night," said the playwright.

"That tired business man? Huh!" said Verba expressively. "By the time he'd got through fussing over

the style of contract he wanted, in case he liked the part and we liked him in it, and then quarrelling about the salary he was to get, and then arguing out how high up the list his name was to appear in the billing, your friend Grainger was completely exhausted.

"And then, on top of that, he discovered we were going to Chicago after the opening in Rochester, and he balked. Said his following was here in New York. Said he'd supposed we were coming right in here after the opening instead of fussing round on the road. Said he couldn't think of being kept out of New York at the beginning of the season unless he got at least seventy-five more a week. Said he'd go back to vaudeville first. Said he had a swell offer from the two-a-day shops anyhow.

"Then I said a few things to Grainger and he walked out on me. His following!—do you get that? Grainger could carry all the following he's got in the top of his hat and still have plenty of room left for his head. So there you are, my son—within ten days of the tryout and nobody on hand to play dear old grandfather for you! And nobody in sight either—in case anybody should happen to ask you."

"Oh we'll find somebody," said Offutt optimistically. The young of the playwrighting species are constitutionally optimistic.

"Oh, we will, will we? Well, for example, who?—since you're so confident about it."

"That's up to you," countered Offutt, "I should worry!"

"Take it from me, young man, you'd better worry," growled Verba morosely.

"But, Verba," contended young Offutt, "there must be somebody loose who'll fit the part. What with thousands of actors looking for engagements—"

"Say, Offutt, what's the use of going over that again?" broke in Verba in a tone which indicated he was prepared to go over it again. "To begin with,

there are n't thousands of actors looking for jobs. There are a few actors looking for jobs — and a few thousand others looking for jobs who only think they can act. Off hand, I can list you just three men fit to play this grandfather part — or four, if you stick in Grainger as an added starter."

He held up a long, slender hand, ticking off the names on his fingers.

"There's Warburton, and there's Pell, and there's old Gabe Clayton. Warburton's tied up in the pictures. Damn the movies! They're stealing everybody worth a hang. I got a swell offer myself yesterday from the Ziegler crowd to direct features for 'em. The letter's on my desk now. Old Gabe is in a sanitarium taking the rest cure — which means for the time being he's practically sober, but not available for us or anybody else. And Guy Pell's under contract to Fructer Brothers, and you know what a swell chance there is of their loaning him to our shop.

"That does n't leave anybody but Grainger, who's so swelled up with conceit that he's impossible. And, anyhow he's too young. Just as I told you yesterday, I only figured him in as a last chance. I don't want a young fellow playing this part — with his face all messed up with false whiskers and an artificial squeak in his voice. I want an old man — one that looks old and talks old and can play old.

"He's got to be right or nothing's right. You may have written this piece, boy; but, by gum, I'm responsible for the way it's cast, and I want a regular, honest-to-God grandfather. Only," he added, quoting the tag of a current Broadway story, "only there ain't no such animal."

"I still insist, Verba," put in Offutt, "that you overestimate the importance of the grandfather — he's only a character bit."

"Son," said Verba, "you talk like an author! Maybe you thought he was a bit when you wrote him in;

but he's not. He's going to carry this play. He's the axle that the whole action turns on and if he's wrong the whole thing's wrong. If he falls down your play falls down."

"Well, suppose he is," said Offutt plaintively. The bruised worm was beginning to turn. "Am I to blame because I write a part so human and so lifelike that nobody's competent to do it?"

Verba gave him a sidelong glance and grinned sardonically. "Don't ask me whose fault it is," he said. "I know this: In the old days actors were actors." Verba, who was perhaps forty-four, spoke with the air of having known Edmund Kean intimately. "They bred real artists then—people who had versatility and a range. You got hold of a play and you went out and hired a bunch of troupers, and they played it for you. Now we don't have actors any more—we only have types.

"Everybody's a type. A man or a woman starts out being one kind of type, and sticks right there. Dramatists write parts for types, and managers go out and hire types for the parts. Sometimes they can't find the right type and then there's another expensive production taking a trip to its eternal rest in the storehouse. I don't know whose fault it is—I only know it's not mine. It's hell—that's what it is—simply hell!"

Gloom choked Verba. He stared moodily ahead of him, where the broad of a wide, blue-ginghamed back showed above the draped tops of the next row of seats but one. Suddenly he smote his hands together.

"Bateman!" he exclaimed. "Old Bird Bateman!"

Up from behind the next row of seats but one rose a chorelady with her nose in the air and her clenched fists on the places where her hips should have been—if she had any hips.

"I beg your par-r-don?" she inquired, quivering with a grand, indignant politeness; "was you referrin' to me as an ould boid?"

"Madam," said Verba, "resume your pleasures. I was n't thinking of you."

"Thin why was you lookin' at me whin you said it? You may be the owner of this bum dump, f'r all I care, but job or no job, let me tell you this, young man—there's no black Prowtestant Jew alive kin call me out of me own name an'——"

"Oh, shut up," said Verba, without heat. He got on his feet. "Come on, Offutt, the lady thinks I'm trying to flirt with her and between the three of us, we're breaking up rehearsals. Let's get out—I've got an idea." In the half light his eyes shone like a cat's.

Outside, on the hot pavement, he took Offutt by the lapels of his coat. "Boy," he said, "did you ever hear of Burton Bateman—better known as Old Bird Bateman?"

Offutt shook his head.

"Never did," he confessed.

"You're too young at this game to remember, I guess," said Verba. "Well, then, did you ever hear of the Scudder Stock Company?"

"Of course I've heard of that," said Offutt. "It was long before my time though."

"It was long before everybody's time," assented Verba. "Ten years is the same as a century on this street. But twenty-five years ago Burt Bateman played leads with the Scudder Stock Company—yes; and played juveniles and walking gentlemen and friends of the family and long-lost heirs and Dutchmen and Irishmen and niggers—played high-comedy parts and low-comedy parts—played anything there was to play.

"He was n't one of your single-barrelled modern types and none of your old-time ranting scenery-biters either; he was an actor. If he'd come along a little later they'd have made a star out of him and probably ruined him. You'd have remembered him then. But he never was a star. He never was featured even. He just kept right

on being an actor. And gee, how he could eat up an old man's part!"

"You speak of him as though he were dead," said Offutt.

"He might as well be—he's forgotten," said Verba, unconsciously coining all Broadway's epitaph for all Broadway's tribe. "I have n't seen him for fifteen years, but I understand he's still alive—that is, he has n't quit breathing. Somebody was telling me not long ago they'd crossed his trail 'way downtown.

"You see, Burt Bateman was a character in his way, just as old Nate Scudder was one in his way. I guess that's why they hung together so long. When the theatrical district started to move uptown Nate would n't move with it. It moved from Fourteenth Street to Twenty-third, and from there to Thirty-fourth, and from there to Forty-second—and it's still headed north. But Scudder stayed where he was. And it broke him—broke his heart, too, I guess. Anyhow, he died and his organisation scattered—all but Bateman. He would n't scatter. The heirs fell out and the estate—what was left of it—got tied up in litigation; and it's been tied up ever since."

He turned and waved a long arm at a passing taxi. The driver curved his machine up to the curb.

"Come on!" said Verba, making to cross the sidewalk.

"Come on where?" asked Offutt.

"We're going to University Place—you and me," said Verba, quickened and alive all over with his inspiration. "We're going down to Scudder's Theater. Did n't know there was such a theater as Scudder's, did you? Well, there is—what's left of it. We're going down there to find Old Bird Bateman. That's where he was, last accounts. And if the booze has n't got him he's going to play that damn grandfather in this show of yours."

"Can he do it?"

Verba halted with one foot in the taxi.

"Can he do it? Watch him, boy—that's all! Just

watch him. Say, it's a notion — digging that old boy out of the graveyard.

"You never heard of him and I'd forgotten him; but you take a lot of these old-timers who don't think there've been any actors since Fanny Davenport and Billy Florence — they'll remember him. And you bet they'll come to see him. We'll give this town a sensation — and that's what it loves, this town — sensations."

Once upon a time — that was when he was a green reporter newly come to town — Offutt had known, more or less minutely, almost every prowable inch of the tip of the long seamy tongue of rock that is called Manhattan Island. Now, as a story-writer and a play-writer, he only went down there when he sought for local colour in Greenwich Village, or around Washington Square or on the lower East Side. As for Verba, he found his local colour, ready-mixed, in scene-painters' pots and make-up boxes. Being a typical New Yorker — if there is such a thing — he was as insular, as provincial, as closely bound to his own briefened ranging ground as none but a typical New Yorker can be. To him this was n't a metropolis of five boroughs, many bridges and five-and-a-half millions. To him this was a strip of street, something less than two miles long, with shorter stretches of street meeting it at right angles, east and west, as ribs meet a spine. His map of New York would have resembled a codfish's skeleton, its head aiming toward far-away Harlem, the fork in its tail pointing to the distant Battery. To him therefore Twenty-third Street was Farthest South. What might lie below was in the Antarctic Circle of community life.

They crossed Twenty-third Street and invaded a district grown strange to his eyes — a district where tall loft buildings, the successors to the sweatshops of an earlier, but not very much earlier, day, mounted, floor by floor, above the humbler roofs of older houses. They crossed Fourteenth, the taxi weaving a way through dense masses of men who gabbled in strange tongues among

themselves, for lunch-time had come and the garment workers, the feather-workers and the fur-workers, deserting their work benches for an hour, had flocked into the open, packing the sidewalks and overflowing upon the asphalt, to chaffer and gossip and take the air. Just below Fourteenth Street they swung eastward and turned into University Place, which is a street of past memories and present acute activities, and, in a minute, obeying Verba's instructions, their driver brought them to a standstill before a certain number.

"Give it the once-over," advised Verba as he climbed out and felt in his pocket for the fare. "You can figure for yourself how far out of the world it is — nobody's had the nerve to try to open it up as a moving-picture palace. And that's the tip-off on any shack in this burg that'll hold a crowd, a screen and a projecting machine all at the same time."

Offutt looked, and marvelled that he had never noticed this place before since surely, covering assignments or on exploration jaunts, he must have passed it by a score of times. It stood midway of the block. On one side of it was a little pawnshop, its single grimy window filled with the strange objects which persons acquire, seemingly, for pawning purposes exclusively — sword-canes and mandolins with mother-of-pearl insets in them, and moss-agate cuff buttons. On the other side was a trunk store with half of its wares cluttering the narrow-door passage and signs everywhere displayed to inform the public that the proprietor was going out of business and must sell his stock at an enormous sacrifice, wherefore until further notice, perfectly ruinous prices would prevail. It appears to be a characteristic of all trunk-stores that their proprietors are constantly going out of business and that their contents, invariably, are to be had below cost.

Between these two establishments gaped a recessed and cavernous entryway flanked by two big stone pillars of a dropsical contour and spanned over at the top by a top-heavy cornice ponderously and painfully Corinthian in

aspect. The outjutting eaves rested flat on the coping stones and from there the roof gabled up sharply. Old gates, heavily chained and slanting inward, warded the opening between the pair of pillars, so that the mouth of the place was muzzled with iron, like an Elizabethan shrew's.

Above, the building was beetle-browed; below, it was dish-faced. A student of architectural criminology would pause before this façade and take notes.

The space inclosed within the skewed and bent gate pickets was a snug harbor for the dust of many a gritty day. There were little grey drifts of it at the foot of each of the five steps that led up to the flagged floor level; secretions of grime covered the barred double doors on beyond the steps, until the original colour was only to be guessed at; scraps of dodgers, pieces of newspaper and tattered handbills adhered to every carved projection at the feet of the columns, like dead leaves about tree boles in the woods.

On the frieze overhead might be made out, in lettering that once had been gold-leafed, the line: Scudder's Family Theatre. The words were scarcely decipherable now. Bill-posters had coated every available inch of space with snipes and sheets.

Verba shook the gates until the hasps gritted and the chains clanged.

"Nobody at home," he said. "I guess the sheriff locked her up when the lawsuits started and then threw away the key. Well, let's scout round. Somebody's sure to know our man; they told me Bateman was a neighborhood character down here. A cop ought to be able to help us — only I don't see one. Maybe they don't have cops in this street."

Speculatively his eyes ranged the vista up and down the block and opposite. He pointed to a saloon diagonally across the way, next door to the first corner south.

"When in doubt," he said, "ask everybody's friend. Come on; we'll go over and brace the barkeep."

A young man, with a humorous slant to his eyebrows and dark hair combed back from the forehead in neatly ornate scallops, pulled down the front of a reasonably clean white jacket and spread both hands on the bar, awaiting their pleasure.

"Mister Wine Clerk," said Verba, using the ceremonial title of his Tenderloin range, "we're trying to find an old boy named Bateman — Burton Bateman, retired actor by profession. Ever hear of him?"

"Sure!" assented the barkeeper. "He's part of the fixtures — Old Bird is; but he ain't about now. To ketch him, you've come an hour late."

"Lives round here somewhere, does n't he?"

"Search me," said the young man succinctly. "I guess he don't exactly live anywhere — not in a regular lodging house or anything like that. See? I never asked him — him being sort of touchy about his private affairs — but I guess he sleeps in some hole somewhere. He mostly does his scoffin' here though — as a guest of the house."

"Does his what here?" asked Verba.

"His scoffin'—his feedin'. See?" The young man flirted a thumb in the direction of the free-lunch counter.

"Oh! He eats here?"

"You said it! The boss — man that owns this liquor store — is a kind of an old-timer round here himself. I've heard him say he knowed The Bird away back yonder when the old theatre 'crost the street was runnin' and things was breakin' better for the old boy than what they do now. So he stakes him to a drink every now and then — Old Bird won't take a piece of change, but he will take a drink — and he lets him browse off the free lunch all he's a mind to.

"He comes driftin' in here twicet a day regular and fills up on chow for nothin'! But he's been here already and left to-day—'bout an hour ago. I figure he won't be back now till 'long about four or five o'clock."

Verba became cognisant of a tugging at his coat. An incredibly small, incredibly ragged boy, with some drag-

gled first editions under his arm, had wormed silently in between his legs and was looking up at him with one eye. The boy had only one eye to look with. The other eye was a flattened slit over a sunken socket.

"Mister! Say, Mister!" beseeched the gamin earnestly. "Gimme fi' cent and I'll —"

"Hey, you, Blinky!" interposed the barkeeper, bending over the bar to see the small intruder. "Beat it!"

There was a scurrying thud of bare feet on the tiled floor and the wizened intruder magically had vanished between the swinging doors.

"You gents can sit down and wait if you want to," said the barkeeper. "It's liable to be a long time though. Or I can tell Old Bird, when he comes in, somebody's askin' for him and try to hold him for you. I could 'phone you even, if it's important—if you'll gimme your number."

"It is important—in a way," said Verba. "Suppose we do that, Offutt—give the wine clerk our telephone number."

He laid a coin and a card on the bar. The young man regarded the name and the address on the card briefly.

"All right!" he said, depositing the coin in his pocket and the card against the mirror at his back. "I won't forget. The old boy don't have many people lookin' for him. Fact is, I don't remember he ever had anybody lookin' for him before. Are you gents friends of his? . . . No? Well, anyhow, I'll fix it."

"Funny old sneezer!" he continued. "Dippy a little up here, I guess."

He tapped himself on the forehead.

"If he had a habit I'd say sometimes he was hopped. F'r instance, he'll come in here and spiel off something to me 'bout havin' been in his Louie Kahn's drawin'-room—anyhow, that's what it sounds like. The only Louie Kahn round here that I know of runs a junk shop over in Ninth Street. And it's a cinch that Louie Kahn ain't got no drawin'-room. Or he'll tell me he's been

spendin' the day on the seabeach. Only yes'day he was handin' me that junk."

"Might n't he have taken a little run down to Coney?" suggested Verba hopefully.

"Go to Coney — him!" scoffed the barkeeper. "Where 'd he raise the coin for carfare down to Coney? You can take it from me, gents, Old Bird forgot what the sad sea waves sound like, long time ago. I'll lay you a little eight-to-five he ain't been a quarter of a mile away from this liquor store in ten years. . . . Well, good day, gents."

"It strikes me, Verba," began Offutt as they passed out, "that possibly we're only wasting our time. If what that gabby young drink wrestler just said is right we're —"

Something wriggled at his knees and caromed off against Verba. A single bright, greedy eye appraised them both with an upward flash.

"Mister! Mister, listen!" pleaded a voice, the owner of which managed somehow to be in the path of both of them at once. "I heard yous spielin' in there. I know where Old Boid is. I kin show yous where he is."

"Where is he?" demanded Verba.

"Gimme fi' cent — gimme ten cent — first. It's a securut. It's worth ten cent."

"It is," agreed Verba gravely. "It's worth all of ten cents now and it'll be worth a quarter more to you, sonny, if you deliver the goods."

He tendered the advance instalment of the fee, and a hand, all claws like a bird's foot, snatched it away from him.

Blinky carefully pouched the dime in some unfathomable inner recess of his rags. Having provided against any attempt to separate him from the retainer in the event of the negotiations falling through, his code of honour asserted itself.

"It's a securut. See? They ain't nobody but me and two-t'ree udder kids wise to it. Yous gotta swear yous

won't tell 'im nor nobody 't was me tipped yous off. If yous did it'd spoil me graft—he'd be sore. See? Cold nights he lets us kids bunk in there wit' 'im. And daytimes we plays audiunce for 'im. See?"

"You play what for him?" asked Offutt.

"C'm on, an' I'll show yous," bade Blinky. "Only yous is gotta lay dead w'ile it's comin' off. See?"

"We'll lay dead," pledged Verba.

Satisfied, Blinky led the way. Mystified, they followed. He led them back across University Place again; and on past Scudder's Family Theatre, with the lowering stone frontal bone above and, below, the wide maw, bitted and gagged by its scold's bridle of snaffled iron; and on round the corner below into a fouled, dingy cross street.

Beyond the canvas marquee of a small walled-in beer garden the child went nimbly through a broken panel in a short stretch of aged and tottery wooden fencing. Wriggling through the gap behind him they found themselves in a small inclosure paved with cracked flagging. Confronting them was a short flight of iron steps, leading up to a wide, venerable-appearing doorway, which once, as the visible proof showed, had been sealed up with plank shorings, nailed on in vertical strips.

"One of the old side entrances to Scudder's," said Verba. "Where the carriages used to wait, I guess. The plot thickens—eh, Offutt?"

Offutt nodded, his eyes being on their small guide. A little sense of adventure possessed them both. They had the feeling of being co-conspirators in a little intrigue.

"Wotcher waitin' fur?" demanded Blinky. "Stick wit' me and don't make no noise." He climbed the iron steps and shoved the nail-pocked door ajar. "Watch yer step!" he counselled as he vanished within. "It's kind o' dark in yere."

Kind o' dark was right. Straining their eyes they stumbled along a black passage, with Blinky going on ahead silently. They turned once to the left and once to

the right and emerged, where the light was somewhat clearer, into the shelter of a recess just behind the lower boxes of the abandoned playhouse.

"Wow!" said Verba in a sort of reverential undertone, as though he stood in the presence of death. "I have n't been here in twenty-odd years. Why, the last time I was here I was a kid!"

Veritably he did stand in the presence of death. The place looked dead and smelled dead and was dead. The air was heavy-laden with bone-yard scents — rot and corrosion and rust and dust. With the taints of moulded leather and gangrened metal, of worm-gnawed woodwork and moth-eaten fabrics, arose also from beneath their feet that other stench which inevitably is begotten of neglect and lonesomeness within any spot inclosed by walls and a roof, provided sun and wind and human usage are excluded from it long enough. Offutt sniffed and, over Verba's shoulder, looked about him.

He could make out his immediate surroundings fairly well, for the curtains that had guarded the windows in the hip roof and round one upper side of the building were turned by decay into squares of lace-work, patterned with rents and with cracks; and in some instances they had fetched away from their fastenings altogether.

Through the glass panes, and through the grime that bleared the glass, a measure of daylight filtered, slanting in pale bluish streaks, like spilt skim milk, on vistas of the faded red-plush chairs; on the scrolled and burdened decorations of the proscenium arch; on the seamy, stained curtain; on the torn and musty hangings of the boxes; on an enormous gas chandelier which, swinging low over the pit from the domed ceiling above, was so clumped with swathings of cobweb that it had become a great, dangling grey cocoon.

Curving in wide swings from above their heads to the opposite side ran three balconies, rising one above the other, and each supported by many fat pillars. The

spaces beneath these galleries were shadowy and dark, seeming to stretch away endlessly. So, too, was the perspective of the lower floor, at the back, elaborated by the gloom into a vast, yawning mouth which fairly ached with its own emptiness. But at the front the screened angles of sunlight, stippled as they were with billions of dancing motes, brought out clearly enough the stage of the old theatre and, down under the lip of the stage, the railed inclosure of the orchestra and, at either side, the scarred bulkheads and fouled drapings of the stage boxes, upper tier and lower tier.

Close at hand Offutt was aware of crawling things which might be spiders, and a long grey rat which scuffled across the floor almost beneath his feet, dragging its scaled tail over the boards with a nasty rasping sound. He heard other rats squealing and gnawing in the wainscoting behind him. He was aware, also, of the dirt, which scabbed and crusted everything. And he felt as though he had invaded the vault of an ancient tomb. Sure enough, in a manner of speaking, he had done just that.

"Some place — huh, mister?" said the small gutter-sparrow proudly, and, though he spoke in a whisper, Offutt jumped. "Stick yere, yous two," ordered the child. "Somethin' ll be comin' off in a minute."

Seemingly he had caught a signal or a warning not visible to the older intruders. Leaving them, he ran briskly down a side aisle, and apparently did not care now how much noise he might make, for he whooped as he ran. He flung his papers aside and perched himself in a chair at the very front of the pit. He briskly rattled the loose back of the chair in front of him, and, inserting two dirty fingers at the corners of his mouth, emitted the shrill whistle by which a gallery god, since first gallery gods were created into an echoing world, has testified to his impatient longings that amusement be vouchsafed him.

As though the whistle had been a command, the daubed old curtain shivered and swayed. A dead thing was

coming to life. Creaking dolefully, it rolled up and up until it had rolled up entirely out of sight.

A back drop, lowered at a point well down front, made the stage shallow. Once upon a time this back drop had been intended to represent a stretch of beach with blue rollers breaking on beyond. Faded as it was, and stained and cracked and scaly as it was now, the design of the artist who painted it was yet discernible; for he plainly had been one who held by the pigmented principle that all sea sands be very yellow and all sea waves be very blue.

Out of the far wings came a figure of a man, crossing the narrowed space to halt midway of the stage, close up to the tin gutter where the tipless prongs of many gas-jet footlights stood up like the tines in a garden rake. Verba's hand tightened on Offutt's arm, dragging him farther back into the shadows, and Verba's voice spoke, with a soft, tense caution, in Offutt's ear: "Lord! Lord!" Verba almost breathed the words out. "'Backward, turn backward, O Time, in your—' Look yonder, Offutt! It's him!"

He might have spared the urging. Offutt was looking and, without being told, knew the man at whom he looked was the man the two of them had come here to find. The lone gamin in the pit clapped his talons of hands together, making a feeble, thin sound. To this applause, as to a rousing greeting, the figure behind the footlights bowed low, then straightened. And Offutt could see, by one of the slanting bars of tarnished daylight, which stabbed downward through the dusk of the place, that the man up there on the stage was a very old man, with a heavy, leonine face and heavy brows and deep-set, big grey eyes, and a splendid massive head mopped with long, coarse white hair; and he was dressed as a fop of sixty years ago and he carried himself so.

The slash of indifferent sunshine, slicing into the gloom like a dulled sword blade, rested its lowermost tip full upon him. It brought out the bleached pallor of his skin, for his face was free from any suggestion of make-up,

and it showed the tears and frays in his costume, and the misshapen shoes that were on his feet, and the high-shouldered, long-tailed coat, and the soiled, collarless shirt which he wore beneath the once gorgeous velvet waistcoat.

In one hand he held, by a dainty grip on the brim, a flat-crowned derby hat, and between the fingers of the other hand twirled a slender black walking stick, with the shreds of a silken tassel adhering to it. And everything about him, barring only the shoes and the shirt, which plainly belonged to his everyday apparel, seemed fit to fall apart with age and with shabbiness.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said — and his voice filled all the empty house by reason of its strength and its toned richness — "with your kind indulgence I shall begin this entertainment with an attempt at an imitation of the elder Sothern in his famous rôle of Lord Dundreary, depicting him as he appeared in one of the scenes from that sterling and popular comedy, *Our American Cousin*, by Tom Taylor, Esquire."

With that, instantly stepping into character, he took a mincing, jaunty pace or two sideways. Half turning toward an imaginary confrère and addressing that mythical listener, he began a speech which, being pieced together with other speeches, at once lengthened into a kind of monologue. But he knew the lines — that was plain; and he knew the part, too, and for the moment lived and breathed it, and in all regards veritably was it. That, likewise, the watching pair of eavesdroppers could realise, though neither of them was of sufficient age to remember, even had he seen, the great craftsman whose work old Bateman now was counterfeiting.

The interlopers looked on and, under the spell of a wizardry, forgot indeed they were interlopers. For before their eyes they saw, wonderfully re-created, a most notable conception, and afterward would have sworn, both of them, that all of it — the drawl and the lisp, the exaggerated walk, the gestures, the play of leg and arm, the swing of body, the skew of head, the lift of eye-

brow even — was as true and as faithful to the original as any mirrored image might be to the image itself.

How long they stood and watched neither Verba nor Offutt was subsequently able to say with any reasonable exactitude. It might have been four minutes; it might have been six, or even eight. When later, taking counsel together, they sought to reckon up the time, the estimates varied so widely they gave up trying to reconcile them.

This much, though, they were sure of — that, in his mumming, old Bateman rose magically triumphant above the abundant handicaps of his own years and his own physique, his garb and his environment. Doing the undoable, he for the moment threw aside his years as one might throw aside the weight of a worn-out garment, and for that moment, to suit his own designs of mimicry, made floods of strength and youthfulness course through those withered arteries.

The old man finished with a whimsical turn of his voice and a flirt of his cane to match it. He bowed himself off with the hand which held the hat at his breast, and promptly on the second he disappeared the ancient curtain began to descend, Blinky meanwhile clapping with all his puny might.

Offutt turned to his companion. Behind the shelter of the box Verba's lean, dark face was twitching.

"Is he there? Can he act? Was I right?" Verba asked himself each question, and himself answered each with a little earnest nod. "Gee, what a find!"

"Not a find, Verba," whispered Offutt — "a resurrection — maybe. We've seen a genius in his grave."

"And we're going to dig him up." In his intentness Verba almost panted it. "Wait! Wait!" he added warningly then, though Offutt had not offered to stir. "This is going to be a Protean stunt, I take it. Let's let him show some more of his goods; for, by everything that's holy, he's got 'em!"

Up once more the curtain lifted, seemingly by its own motive power; and now the seaside drop was raised, and

they beheld that, behind it, the stage had been dressed for another scene — a room in a French house. A secrétaire, sadly battered and marred, stood at one side; a bookcase with broken doors and gaping, empty shelves stood at the other, balancing it off. Down stage was an armchair. Its tapestry upholstery was rotted through and a freed spiral of springs upcoiled like a slender snake from its cushioned seat. All three pieces were of a pattern — “Louie-the-Something stuff,” Verba would have called them.

A table, placed fronting the chair but much nearer the right lower entrance than the chair was, and covered with a faded cloth that depended almost to the floor, belonged evidently to the same set. The scenery at the back showed a balcony, with a wide French window, open, in the middle. Beyond the window dangled a drop, dingy and discoloured as all the rest was, but displaying dimly a jumble of painted housetops and, far away in the simulated distance, the Arc de Triomphe. The colours were almost obliterated, but the suggestion of perspective remained, testifying still to the skill of the creator.

From the wings where they had seen him vanish Bateman reappeared. The trousers and the shoes were those he had worn before; but now, thrown on over his shirt, was the melancholy wreck of what once had been a blue uniform coat, with huge epaulets upon the shoulders and gold braid upon the collar and the cuffs, and brass buttons to fasten it in double-breasted fashion down the front. Now, though, it hung open. Some of the buttons were missing, and the gold lacings were mere blackened wisps of rags.

Bateman came on slowly, with dragging feet, his arms and legs and head quivering in a violent palsy. He stared out of the window as he let himself down carefully into the ruined armchair. His first movement proved that he played a venerable, very decrepit man — a man near death from age and ailments; yet by his art he managed to project, through the fleshly and physical weaknesses of

the character, a power of dignity, of dominance, and of mental authority. He rolled his head back weakly.

“‘My child,’” he said, addressing a make-believe shape before him, “‘I must help to receive our brave, victorious troops. See! I am fittingly dressed to do them honour.’”

His tones were pitched in the cracked cackle of senility. He paused, as though for an answer out of space. His inflection told as he, in turn, replied that this answer had been a remonstrance:

“‘No, no, no!’” he said almost fiercely. “‘You must not seek to dissuade me.’”

The words stung Verba’s memory, raising a welt of recollection there.

“I’ve got it!” he said exultantly, not forgetting, though, to keep his voice down. “Siege of Berlin, by that French fellow — what’s his name? — Daudet!”

“I remember the story,” answered Offutt.

“I remember the play,” said Verba. “Somebody dramatized it — Lord knows who — and Scudder put it on here as a curtain raiser. I saw it myself, Offutt — think of that! Sitting up yonder in the old peanut roost — a kid no bigger than that kid down there — I saw it. And now I’m seeing it again; seeing Burt Bateman play the part of the old paralytic — you know, the old French officer who was fooled by his doctor and his granddaughter into believing the French had licked the Germans, when all the time ’t was the other way and —”

“Sh-h!” counseled Offutt.

After another little wait Bateman was going on with his scene:

“‘Listen! Listen!’” he cried, cupping a tremulous palm behind his ear. “‘Do you not hear them far away? — the trumpets — the trumpets of victorious France! Our forces have entered Berlin! Thank God! Thank God! All Paris will celebrate. I must greet them from the balcony.’”

With a mighty effort he reared himself to his feet,

straightening his slanted shoulders, erecting his lolled head. His fingers fumbled at button and buttonhole, fastening his coat at the throat. He swung one arm imperiously, warding off imaginary hands.

“‘The trumpets! The trumpets! Hark! They come nearer and nearer! They sound for the victory of France — for a heroic army. I will go! Doctor or no doctor, I this day pay my homage to our glorious army. Stand back, *ma chérie!*’”

Offutt, fifty feet away, caught himself straining his ears to hear those trumpets too. A rat ran across his foot and Offutt never knew it.

“‘They come! They come!’” chuckled Bateman.

He dragged himself up stage, mounted the two stairs to the balcony, and stood in the window, at attention, to salute the tri-coloured flag. Nor did he forget to keep his face half turned to the body of the house.

He smiled; and the two unseen spies, staring at that profiled head, saw the joy that was in the smile. Then, in the same moment, the expression changed. Dumb astonishment came first — an unbelieving astonishment; then blank stupefaction; then the shock of horrified understanding; then unutterable rage.

Offutt recalled the tale from which the playlet had been evolved, and Verba, for his part, recalled the playlet; but, had neither known what they knew, the both of them, guided and informed only by the quality of Bateman's acting, still could have anticipated the climax now impending; and, lacking all prior acquaintance with the plot of it, yet would have read that the cripple, expecting to cheer his beloved French, saw advancing beneath the Arc de Triomphe the heads of the conquering Germans, and heard, above the calling bugles, not the Marseillaise, but the strains of a Teuton marching song. His back literally bristled with his hate. He spun about full face, a mortally stricken man. His clenched fists rose above his head in a command.

“‘To arms! To arms!’” he screamed impotently,

with the rattle already in his throat. " 'The Prussians! The Prus —' "

He choked, tottered down the steps, reeled forward and fell headlong out into the room, rolling in the death spasm behind the draped table; and as, ten seconds later, the curtain began to unroll from above and lengthen down, Offutt found himself saying over and over again, mechanically:

"Why, he's gone, is n't he?"

"He kept the table between him and the house and crawled out behind it — trust him not to spoil his picture!" explained Verba. "And trust him to know the tricks of his trade." He tugged at Offutt's elbow. "Come on, boy; I've seen enough and so have you, I guess. Let's go sign him."

He fumbled at the wall.

"Side passageway back to the stage ought to be round here somewhere. Here it is — that's lucky!"

Guiding himself by the touching of his outstretched hands upon the walls of the opening, Verba felt his way behind the box, with Offutt stumbling along in his rear. So progressing, they came to an iron-sheathed door. Verba lifted its latch and they were in a place of rancid smells and clattering stage duffel. Roaches fled in front of them. On their left a small wooden door stood partly ajar, and through the cranny they looked, as they passed, into a dressing room, where a pallet of old hangings covered half the floor space, and all manner of dingy stock costumings and stage trappings hung upon hooks.

"Here's where he must sleep," said Verba. "What a place for a white man to be living in!"

He felt for his handkerchief to wipe his soiled hands, and then together they saw Bateman advancing toward them from out of the extreme rear of the stage. Over his shoulders was thrown a robe of heavy ragged sack-ing and upon his face he had hung a long, false beard of white hair. He glared at them angrily. And then

Offutt, in instantaneous appraisal, interpreted most surely the look out of those staring big grey eyes.

Verba extended his hand and opened his mouth to speak; but Bateman was already speaking.

"What business have you here?" he demanded. "Strangers are not permitted here during performances. How came the stage doorkeeper to admit you? He has been here too long, that doorkeeper, and he grows careless. I shall have him discharged."

"But, Mr. Bateman," began Verba, half puzzled, half insistent, "I'm in the business myself. I want to—"

"Stand aside!" ordered the old man almost violently. "You cannot have been long in the business, young sir, else you would be more mannerly than to interrupt an artist when his public calls for him. Out of my way, please!"

He strutted by them in stilted vanity and gripped the lifting ropes of the old curtain where they swung in the near angle of the wings, and pulled downward on them with an unexpected display of muscular force. The curtain rose; and as Blinky, still at his place, uplifted a little yell of approbation the old man, bending his shoulders, passed out into the centre of the French drawing-room set and, extending a quivering hand, uttered sonorously the command:

"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!"

"The mad scene from King Lear," said Offutt.

"Sure—Shakspeare!" agreed Verba. "Old Scudder was a bug on that Bard stuff. So was Bateman. He used to know it from cover to cover—Othello, Hamlet, Lear—the whole string. . . . Anyhow, Offutt, I've found the only man to do the grandfather's part in that show of yours, haven't I?"

"I'm sorry to say it, Verba, but you're wrong," stated Offutt.

"How do you mean—I'm wrong?" demanded Verba irritably. Out of the corner of his mouth he aimed the

protest at his companion; but his eyes, through the gap of the first entrance, were fixed on Bateman as he strode back and forth, and his ears drank in the splendid full-lunged volume and thrill of Bateman's voice as the player spoke snatches from the play. "He's not too old — if that's what you mean; he's just about old enough. And he's all there, even if he is old. Didn't you see the strength he had when he hoisted up that heavy curtain?"

"I think I know where that strength came from," said Offutt. "Just a minute, Verba — did you ever hear of the Great Auk?"

"He was in vaudeville, wasn't he?" asked Verba, still staring at Bateman. "A trick juggler or something?"

Offutt forgot to smile.

"The Great Auk was a bird," he said.

"Oh, I see; and I've been calling Bateman Old Bird," said Verba. "I get you."

"No, you don't get me," went on Offutt. "The Great Auk was a rare creature. It got rarer and rarer until they thought it had vanished. They sent an expedition to the Arctic Circle, or wherever it was the thing bred, to get one specimen for the museums; but they came back without it. And now the Great Auk is an extinct species."

"What the devil are you driving at?" snapped Verba, swinging on him.

"Listen yonder!" bade the dramatist. "That old man out yonder is telling you, himself, in better words than I could tell you."

He pointed a finger through the wings. Craning their necks, they heard the deep voice speak the lines:

"Pray, do not mock me:
I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind."

Verba hearkened and he understood. After a little he nodded in gloomy affirmation of the younger man's belief.

"I guess you're right, Offutt," he said disappointedly. "I guess I'd have seen it, too, only I was so sort of carried away. Real acting does me that way — when I see it, which ain't often."

He paused a minute in uncertainty. Then resolution came to him.

"Well," he said, "come on; there's no use of our hanging round here any longer. I'll give Blinky his quarter — he certainly earned it ten times over — and then we'll go back uptown, and I'll telephone Grainger he can have his seventy-five more a week."

"But what are we going to do about — him?" Offutt indicated whom he meant with a wave of his arm toward the stage.

It was Verba's turn. Verba knew the stage and its people and its ways as Offutt would never know them. He had been an actor, Verba had, before he turned managing director for Cohalan & Hymen.

"What are we going to do about him?" he repeated; and then, as though surprised that the other should be asking the question: "Why, nothing! Offutt, every haunted house is entitled to its ghost. This is a haunted house if ever there was one; and there's its ghost, standing out there. You mentioned an extinct species, did n't you? Well, you were dead right, son. So take your good-by look now, before we go, at the last of a great breed. There'll be no more like him, I'm thinking."

"But you can't leave him here like this!" said Offutt. "His mind is gone — you admit it yourself. They've got hospitals and asylums in this state — and homes too. It would be a mercy to take him with us."

"Mercy? It would be the dam'dest cruelty on earth!" snapped Verba. "How long do you suppose he'd live in an asylum if we tore him up by the roots and dragged him away from this place? A week? I tell you, a week would be a blamed long time. No, sir; we leave him right here. And we'll keep our mouths shut about this too. Come on!"

He tiptoed to the iron door and opened it softly. Then, with his hand on the latch, he halted.

Bateman was just finishing. He spoke the mad king's mad tag-line and got himself off the stage. He unreeled the stay rope from its chock. The curtain rumbled down. Through it the insistent clapping of Blinky's skinny paws could be heard.

Smiling proudly the old man listened to the sound. He forgot their presence behind him. He stood waiting. Blinky kept on applauding — Blinky was wise in his part, too. Then, still smiling, Bateman stripped off his beard, and, putting forth a bony white hand, he plucked aside the flapping curtain and stepped forth once more.

Scrouging up behind him and holding the curtain agape, they saw him bow low to the pit where Blinky was, and to the empty boxes, and to the yawning emptiness of each balcony; and they knew that to him this was not a mangy cavern of dead memories and dead traditions and dead days, peopled only by gnawing rats and crawling vermin and one lone little one-eyed street boy, but a place of living grandeurs and living triumphs. And when he spoke, then they knew he spoke, not to one but to a worshipping, clamorous host.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, with a bearing of splendid conceit, "I thank you for the ovation you have given me. To an artist — to an artist who values his art — such moments as this are most precious —"

"Come on, Offutt!" whispered Verba huskily. "Leave him taking his call."